



## A Roadmap for Engaging Families with Young Children



Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

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## Introduction

We know that young children develop in the context of their immediate and extended families and community. During the critical years of birth to eight, many individuals and systems have a strong impact, positive or negative, on a child's growth and learning. No influence is stronger than that of family members, who are called upon to provide the strongest relationships, adequate shelter, food, nurturing, and social stimulation. They are responsible for a child's total well-being, which includes providing access to preventative health care, early intervention, if necessary, and other supports.

Without a doubt, parent well-being is essential to children's well-being. Many believe that taking a two-generation approach, providing equal focus on parents and children, is the way to move families toward educational success and economic security.<sup>1</sup> Parents, as well as children, benefit from links to educational opportunities and referrals to health and mental health services. Families also benefit when linked to social networks that support the needs of adult family members as well as the needs of their children.

The foundation for developing physical and cognitive competence is built in the early years and lays the groundwork for school readiness and later success in school and life. Although parents are often referred to as "the child's first teachers," the community, encompassing the vast array of programs and services available to young children and their families, has a shared responsibility for school readiness and healthy child development. Effectively engaging families in education, health, and other supportive

"We were excited to have a voice regarding the work with the Statewide Family Engagement Taskforce. The unique contributions of all members will help in establishing a balanced partnership with families and communities."

Rockdale County Public Schools

services can lead to optimal development for children and families. Formal and informal programs, including health and mental health systems, nutrition programs, libraries, and museums can be intentionally linked to support the vision of two generations learning and thriving together.

High-quality early childhood development programs provide more than care and education for children. They can serve as partners with parents and become a trusted resource, providing links to needed resources and implementing mutually beneficial strategies.<sup>2</sup> Negotiating multiple systems on behalf of their children can be a challenging effort for families. With positive support from early childhood programs, parents can get the help they need to combine the resources available to them in ways that lead to increased growth and development of the child as well as benefits to the rest of the family.

To many it seems like common sense: the more engaged parents and families are in their children's growth and development, the better it is for the children. But many have struggled with how to create meaningful and lasting partnerships. Georgia's early childhood agency, Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and

<sup>1</sup> 2014, J. Lombardi, A. Mosle, N. Patel, R. Schumacher, J. Stedron, Gateways to Two Generations, *The Potential for Early Childhood Programs and Partnerships to Support Parents and Children Together*, produced by Ascend, The Aspen Institute.

<sup>2</sup> 2009, L.C. Halgunseth, A. Peterson, D.R. Stark, S. Moodie, *Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and Early Childhood Education Programs: An Integrated Review of the Literature*, produced by NAECY and Pre-K now.



- Promoting Early Learning Outcomes
- Developing a Great Early Childhood Education Workforce
- Measuring Outcomes and Progress

Family engagement, particularly in Quality Rated, the state's quality rating and improvement system, is an important component across all five areas. The plan's vision for a quality system included "families as engaged partners in the early education of their children."

## Developing Georgia's Family Engagement Roadmap

In July 2014 DECAL convened the Family Engagement Task Force to create statewide family engagement principles, values, and implementation supports to be broadly adopted and used in the state's early learning and development programs. Building on the strong family engagement work already underway around the state, the task force sought to create a common definition of family engagement and a framework for a statewide strategy.

"I appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with multiple stakeholders who shared their vision of what family engagement in Georgia should look like and agree to work together to set parameters to define quality family engagement from cradle to career."

Michelle Smith Lank  
Kid's World Learning Center, Owner  
Georgia Child Care Association, President

The group initially focused on DECAL's work specifically with the intention of supporting implementation over time to all child- and family-serving agencies in Georgia. The task force engaged 55 child- and family-serving stakeholders representing state and community agencies, early and higher education, and families (the list of members included at the end of this report). The group began by reviewing the programs and strategies already making a difference in Georgia and by identifying approaches with the potential for statewide implementation. An executive workgroup was created and empowered to finalize recommendations.

The task force aimed to support all Georgia families with children birth to eight, particularly families with high needs. Building off the work of the Campaign for Grade Level

Learning (DECAL) and their partner agencies are focused on embedding strong family engagement principles and practices in all of its work throughout the state.

Partnering with families requires two-way communication that builds on the strengths, knowledge, and abilities of families. Early childhood services alone cannot prepare children for kindergarten. Instead, children need the support of their families and communities. To provide this support, early childhood programs need to implement family engagement processes that research has shown to be effective in encouraging children's growth and development, including socio-emotional development.<sup>3</sup>

Research shows that programs and services are most effective when they value the cultural and linguistic diversity of the children and families they serve. Effective early childhood programs and services create a welcoming environment that respects diversity, supports children's ties to family, culture, and community, and promotes second language acquisition and children's home languages and cultural identity. Effective programs see linguistic and cultural diversity as an asset, not a deficit, for young children.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, effective programs support the value and benefits of bilingualism and partner with families to promote its development.

In December 2013, Georgia was named a winner in the third round of the federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge initiative. The state will receive \$51.7 million over the four-year grant period. Georgia's application focused on five critical areas:

- Building Successful State Systems
- Increasing High Quality, Accountable Programs

<sup>3</sup> 2006, H.Weiss, M. Caspe, M. Elena Lopez, Harvard Family Research Project, *Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education*, Family Involvement Makes a Difference.

<sup>4</sup> 2009 *Where We Stand: On Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity*, NAEYC.



Reading, Get Georgia Reading, the group considered family engagement strategies and tactics keeping in mind the factors critical to ensuring access for each and every family. These factors include affordability, accessibility, availability, accommodation, acceptability, and awareness.

## Georgia’s Definition of Family Engagement

The task force agreed that a critical first step in implementing strong family engagement practices was to develop a common definition of family engagement in Georgia. After much discussion, the group determined that:

*Family engagement is the shared responsibility of families, schools, early education programs, and communities to actively promote, support, and sustain family wellbeing, healthy child development, strong family-child relationships, and lifelong learning for all children and families.*

Authentic and effective family engagement is:

- **Intentional** – purposeful action beginning before birth and continuing through life
- **Universal** – occurring across all settings where children learn
- **Respectful** – capitalizing on the unique strengths and responding to the exceptional needs and challenges of each family
- **Collaborative** – building strong relationships between families and all organizations and agencies working with children and families, including creating opportunities for family leadership and decision making
- **Equitable** – promoting work that identifies the root causes of disparities and supports actions to address them; providing services responsive to the culture, language, and ability of each and every child; and engaging leadership that reflects the ethnic and linguistic diversity of children and families.

## DECAL’s Family Engagement Strategies

DECAL will employ the following strategies to embed family engagement throughout their work, incorporating family engagement principles and practices across DECAL programs, initiatives, and partnership projects.

- To ensure opportunities for family voice and leadership, DECAL will invite families to participate on state advisory committees.
- To enhance equity and access, DECAL will develop training and resources to equip early education and community programs to partner with families with children who are dual language learners and with families whose children have disabilities.

“The Georgia Coalition for English Learners is honored to have been a part of the Georgia Family Engagement Task Force and to support DECAL in its efforts to promote an approach to working with families as partners, in culturally and linguistically responsive ways. Family engagement and the recognition of families as a major force for change in the outcomes for dual language learners is a central pillar of our Coalition’s agenda. We will remain committed to working to empower families of dual language learners, to build their confidence and capacity to effectively support their children’s learning, and to ensure that all early learning and school climates are supportive of the home language and culture of all children.”

Nitza Vega-Lahr, Ph.D.  
Director of English Learners Program  
Rollins Center for Language & Literacy

- DECAL will implement a cross-system professional development strategy including training, training events, and the creation of a family engagement toolkit.
- To support and create community driven family engagement strategies, DECAL will award family engagement mini-grants to communities across Georgia through the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant.
- DECAL will create or expand training and tools for early education teachers and family-serving organizations.
- DECAL will promote family engagement strategies at the program, provider, and community levels through intentional, targeted communication strategies.
- DECAL will build on the work of the task force to enhance effective family engagement as required in the program standards of Georgia’s quality rating and improvement system, Quality Rated.

## Recommendations for QRIS (Quality Rated)

The task force believes that Strengthening Families<sup>5</sup> provides a strong foundation for addressing family engagement through Georgia’s quality rating and improvement system, and recommended that a process be clearly defined for ongoing work to build on that foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Strengthening Families Georgia is a multi-disciplinary partnership of nearly 50 national, state, and local, public and private organizations, dedicated to embedding five research-based Protective Factors into services and supports for children and families.

As a start, steps should be taken to strengthen and improve:

- Two-way communication with all families in all programs and services to more clearly understand and respond to their needs and goals for themselves and their children
- Training, technical assistance, and coaching for teachers and administrators so they clearly address the issues of family engagement
- Monitoring and accountability to ensure that family engagement plans are implemented and that there are mechanisms in place to secure feedback from families and evidence that feedback is incorporated in ongoing quality improvement efforts
- Demonstrated practices regarding culturally and linguistically appropriate program policies and procedures that include all families

## Helpful Resources

### State and National Initiatives and Model Programs

The task force started its work by reviewing selected existing Georgia initiatives focused on family engagement. Representatives from each organization presented information about their initiatives. Check out the following websites for more information on these programs:

- Get Georgia Reading, [www.getgeorgiareading.org](http://www.getgeorgiareading.org)
- Head Start/Early Head Start: Parent, Family and Community Engagement, [eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/framework](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/framework)
- Strengthening Families Georgia, [strengtheningfamiliesga.net/](http://strengtheningfamiliesga.net/)
- Partners Advancing Childhood Education (PACE), [www.unitedwayatlanta.org](http://www.unitedwayatlanta.org)
- National Standards for Family-School Partnerships-Georgia Parent Teacher Association (PTA), [www.pta.org/nationalstandards](http://www.pta.org/nationalstandards)
- 360 Degrees of Family Engagement: Wrapping School, Home and Community Engagement Around Student Achievement Outcomes, [www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Federal-Programs/Pages/360-Degrees-Series.aspx](http://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Federal-Programs/Pages/360-Degrees-Series.aspx)
- Great Start Georgia, [www.greatstartgeorgia.org](http://www.greatstartgeorgia.org)
- Smart and Secure Children (SSC) Satcher Health Leadership Institute-Division of Behavioral Health, Morehouse School of Medicine, [www.msm.edu](http://www.msm.edu)
- The Center for Working Families, Inc., [www.tcwfi.org/](http://www.tcwfi.org/)

“Georgia public libraries are excited to support the critical work of family engagement with other agencies and organizations from across the state.”

Julie Walker, State Librarian

## Web Resources

A number of excellent resources on effective family engagement are available.

The Harvard Family Research Project has compiled a bibliography of family involvement research 2013. This resource, which includes journal articles, dissertations, and theses on the topic of family engagement, can be found at [www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources](http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children website includes a number of position statements, articles, and other documents related to family engagement. A summary of available resources can be found at [www.naeyc.org/familyengagement/resources/resource-list](http://www.naeyc.org/familyengagement/resources/resource-list).

The Office of Head Start National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE), a partnership between the Harvard Family Research Project and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center, identifies, develops, and disseminates evidence-based best practices associated with the strengthening of families and communities to support the positive growth and development of young children. Information on the NCPFCE can be found at [www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/projects/office-of-head-start-national-center-on-parent-family-and-community-engagement-ncpfce](http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/projects/office-of-head-start-national-center-on-parent-family-and-community-engagement-ncpfce).

The Center for Study of Social Policy (CCSP) offers the Strengthening Families framework, an approach intended to prevent child abuse and neglect by helping programs, communities, and families develop protective

“We appreciate the opportunity to actively exchange information and ideas, resulting in a Georgia family engagement definition and set of principles which include equity, with a focus on each and every child. Through the Clarkston Families Decide initiative, funded in part by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, CDF Action will share the definition and principles with families, early learning partners, and the community.”

Roberta Malavenda, Education Director, CDF Action



strategies that enhance child and family wellbeing. CSSP offers many resources including *Growing and Sustaining Parent Engagement, A Toolkit for Parents and Community Partners*, available at [www.cssp.org/publications/growingandsustainingparentengagementtoolkit.pdf](http://www.cssp.org/publications/growingandsustainingparentengagementtoolkit.pdf)

For an example of how another state addressed family engagement in early childhood, see:

*The Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework: Maryland's Vision for Engaging Families with Young Children*, [www.marylandpublicschools.org/msde/divisions/child\\_care/docs/MD\\_Fam\\_Engage.pdf](http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/msde/divisions/child_care/docs/MD_Fam_Engage.pdf)

Other useful resources include:

*New Approaches to Optimizing Child Development and Breaking the Cycle of Poverty*, by Joshua Sparrow, MD  
[www.brazeltontouchpoints.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Touchpoints\\_Theory\\_of\\_Change\\_Dec\\_2008.pdf](http://www.brazeltontouchpoints.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Touchpoints_Theory_of_Change_Dec_2008.pdf)

*Families Know Best: Integrating Parent Knowledge into Young Child Assessment Systems*, BUILD Initiative policy brief and webinar, August 21, 2013, [www.buildinitiative.org/TheIssues/FamilySupport/FamilyEngagement.aspx](http://www.buildinitiative.org/TheIssues/FamilySupport/FamilyEngagement.aspx)

*Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library*, American Library Association, [www.everychildreadytoread.org](http://www.everychildreadytoread.org)

*Connecting with Parents in the Early Years*, Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting, [eecap.crc.illinois.edu/pubs/connecting/](http://eecap.crc.illinois.edu/pubs/connecting/)

“It is great to experience a process that is dedicated to capitalizing on best resources and practices from across sectors to increase the outcomes for our children and families. GAYC is committed to helping carry out the vision of what family engagement means and looks like throughout the state of Georgia as we all work together to raise the quality of care and outcomes for our youngest learners and their families.”

Georgia Association on Young Children

“Recognizing that family context is a key to understanding a child’s change over time, I appreciate that effort of BFTS to place a focus in the state’s early childhood field on family empowerment and engagement. Emphasizing the unique characteristics of families, the statement draws attention to the importance of positive relationships between service providers and families to support the healthy development of our state’s youngest learners. I resolve to:

- Acknowledge the importance of family context in child development
- Promote the statement within my professional circles
- Share and implement the statement within the context of university to educate future early childhood professionals
- Collaborate with childcare providers to examine current practices to engage families

Serving on the Family Engagement Task Force has been a rewarding opportunity.”

Katy Gregg, Ph.D., Child Development Faculty  
Georgia Southern University

## Task Force Members

Diane Bellem, Sheltering Arms Georgia Training Institute  
Elaine Black, Georgia Public Library Service  
Juanita Blount-Clark, Strengthening Families Georgia  
Keith Bostick, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning  
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Dana McCrary, Department of Behavioral Health  
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Vanessa Meyer, Southern Education Foundation  
Jasmine Miller, The Center for Working Families, Inc.  
Laura Miller, United Way of Greater Atlanta  
Shauna Miller, Rockdale Early Learning Center  
Pat Minish, Strengthening Families Georgia  
Stephanie Moss, Parent to Parent of Georgia  
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Allison Setterlind, ICF International – Georgia Head Start  
Lamar Smith, Georgia Department of Human Services-  
Division of Family and Children Services

“We appreciate the leadership that DECAL has provided to support the development and vision of our state’s family engagement framework that can be utilized across all state agencies and child-family serving organizations. Our office is committed to continuing to work and utilize authentic and effective family engagement strategies that promote families as full partners.”  
Office of Prevention and Family Support  
Georgia Division of Family and Children Services

Thom Snyder, Georgia Department of Human Services-  
Division of Aging Services  
Carole Steele, Georgia Department of Human Services-  
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Arianne Weldon, Get Georgia Reading- Campaign  
for Grade-Level Reading  
Stacey Schaff, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning –  
Family Engagement Coordinator – Project Leader  
Sherri Killins, BUILD Initiative – Consultant  
Deborah Stahl, BUILD Initiative - Consultant

“It was such a pleasure to serve on the Family Engagement Task Force and learn about the incredible work of various stakeholders who serve children in Georgia. It’s encouraging to see DECAL’s commitment to family engagement, and this commitment will have a lasting positive impact on children in Georgia.”  
Cassandra Bolar, Ph.D., CFLE, Morehouse School of Medicine

“As a community partner working in the family engagement arena, it is exciting to see a dedicated group of organizations focus on this vital work. With an increased lens on such efforts, the shared definition of family engagement is timely as we work both locally, regionally and statewide to raise awareness of its importance.” United Way of Greater Atlanta

“We have appreciated DECAL’s and BUILD’s leadership to bring together agencies and organizations to develop a family engagement definition and principles that will be useful across disciplines. We will share the document which is aligned with the national Strengthening Families Framework with others and examine our SFG work to ensure it embodies the goals and intent of the Family Engagement Task Force.”  
Strengthening Families Georgia